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ABSTRACT

This study examines the nature of education policy regarding students with special needs in Italy, Ireland, and the United States. It begins by reviewing the definition of inclusion and then explores the nature of legislation pertaining to special needs education and inclusion in the three countries. Results of the study indicate: (1) the most significant difference among the countries is that in the United States and Ireland enabling and permissive suggestions in policy documents have not been mandated, so each school is left to determine its own arrangements; (2) Italy takes the strongest position on inclusion, requiring all schools to provide for children with disabilities in the regular classroom; (3) Italy has eliminated the deficit model, which is still in operation in Ireland and the United States and has placed the primary focus on changing the nature of the educational environment to serve all children; and (4) the overall trend in all three countries appears to be an improvement of education for all and a merging of special education and regular education. (Contains 25 references.) (CR)

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National policy on Inclusion of students with special educational needs in Italy, Ireland, and the United States

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Abstract

The concept of Inclusive Education has developed internationally over the past three decades. The call is for a single, unified educational system in which all students are viewed as unique and special, and entitled to the same quality of service. The U.S., Italy, and Ireland have statements in place to encourage inclusion and the protection of rights for students with disabilities. "Inclusion," as defined in policy documents will be compared using documentary and content analysis. The aim of the study is to expose the similarities and differences in these policies and their implications for the field of special education.

The topic I am speaking about today is Inclusive education. It is the education of students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled peers. Inclusion or integration as it is called in Europe, takes place in regular schools and takes a variety of forms. It is quite a controversial issue at the moment and is the focus of much debate not only among those who work in special education but also among regular educators.

Over the past 30 years, there have been many changes in our views about the responsibilities of society towards disabled people, in the ways we expect people with disabilities to respond to education, and in the extent to which we think they can and should contribute to society. These changes have been given impetus by civil rights movements, by humanitarian concerns and by a clearer understanding of the educational problems faced by people with disabilities. There is now a widespread belief that policies need to be developed and reinforced to stimulate the inclusion of children and adults with disabilities in educational systems. Furthermore it is now broadly accepted that school leavers and adults with disabilities should have better access to the labor market. Work is recognized as more than just a way of making a living - it signifies social recognition and self-affirmation. Economic dependency due to disability is seen as contrary to accepted concepts of social justice and equality of opportunity. In this context, the inclusion of children with disabilities in ordinary schools is a particularly important issue. Proponents of inclusion maintain that if society is to make a commitment to the equal treatment of all, it must demonstrate this value in its practices in schools and teach this principle to the young. The movement toward adoption of inclusive educational practices is purported to combat the marginalizing effects of separateness and labeling, and to assert the political and educational rights of those designated as having special needs. (Biklen – Schooling without labels, UNESCO – Making it happen).

The concept of Inclusive Education has developed internationally over the past three decades. It has dominated the field of special education in the U.S., Europe, Australia, and Africa. Recent proposals on school reform have suggested that general educators need to take responsibility for students with disabilities. Special educators are being moved into the role of consultant or resource staff for students with special needs in the regular education classroom. Special education is being integrated into the mainstream. There is a call for the future is for a single, unified educational system in which all students are viewed as unique and special, and entitled to the same quality of education. International bodies such as The United Nations Organization (UN), The World Bank, and The European Union (E.U.), have all adopted policies which promote the development of integrated provision in education for people with disabilities (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, i.e. UNESCO, 1994; The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989; The UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for People with Disabilities, 1993; World Bank Technical Paper No. 261, Asia Technical Series, 1994; Council of Ministers for Education of the European Union, 1990). According to Reynolds (1989), the history of special education delivery systems can be summarized in two words: progressive inclusion.

The aim of this study is to examine the nature of education policy regarding students with special needs in three particular countries -- Italy, Ireland, and the U.S. These countries were chosen for a number of factors, primarily for their comparability. They differ significantly from one another in general educational practice and societal make-up. Their special education policies were created under very different circumstances, and they exemplify various forms of educational practice. They are all at various stages of considering the practice of inclusive education for students with disabilities. Perhaps there is a "process" or "continuum" of inclusion policy making along

which each country could be plotted. Due to financial and time limitations, the study will be limited to the examination of documents, although case stories on the development process in each country is also considered. The study is still in progress.

In this paper I will talk about:

- the term "inclusion"
- the nature of legislation pertaining to special needs education in the three countries
- possible categories of analysis which have emerged from my explorations thus far

While each country has a philosophy of education that makes up a central aspect of policy documents, it is also an elaborate and involved aspect that would require a presentation all of its own. There is no room for that here. Nor will I talk about the different cultural definitions of the "child" or what the word "disability" means in each country. These deeper issues are indeed at the heart of inclusion and central to its nature, but they do not lend themselves to brief presentations. I hope rather to give you a flavor of the nature of education in each country through their statements of policy on special education.

"Inclusion/Integration"

So, what is inclusion? This is the word used to describe the education of students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers. "Integration" is the word used in most European countries to reference the same activity. The word "integration" is used in a different debate in the U.S. and refers to the elimination of racial practices. Some authors in Ireland are questioning the use of the word "integration" as it carries connotations of equality. Some suggest that exclusion is a more appropriate word to describe the current experience of students with special needs in the regular education system.

Ultimately, however, the language of the law is quite similar in each country. The legislation talks about upholding the right to education for children with disabilities, and recognizing the need to provide services for all. They also acknowledge that students with disabilities have a need for special services and accommodations within school settings. But these details are left to the discrimination and judgment of local control. I have found marked differences in the road each country has taken towards reaching this common ground and would like to focus attention on these.

Legislation

The precursors to the inclusion movement in Italy are found in the 1960's when a number of acts were passed by the Italian National Parliament to create a segregated system of public education for handicapped students. In the 1970's revolutionary changes in the socio-political climate occurred, and the Italian Communist Party sought reforms that would integrate the disenfranchised - the handicapped, the minorities, the poor, the young, and the old - into mainstream of Italian life. Anti-segregation policies were adopted, and the dual nature of the education system was changed (Vitello, 1991). The underlying philosophy for the changes that took place in Italian society emphasized the equality of all and the protection of basic civil liberties. The key aspect of this legislation for students with special needs was the notion that school must be open to everyone. The

underlying pedagogy for the adoption of these inclusion practices in Italy asserted that *educational progress is better when the child is placed in the normal environment.*

In 1971, Italy's National Law established the right of compulsory education for children with disabilities in regular classes of public schools and so began the movement of full integration. The years following 1971 saw the closure of institutions for those who had been considered "mentally defective" and the integration of the disabled into regular society. The legislation no longer treats students with special educational needs as a separate group. Italy now, there is simply education for all children (Berrigan 1995). These changes occurred as a result of a change in perspective in society at large towards the disenfranchised.

In contrast, there has been no policy to end separate schooling in the U.S., but there is an observable movement towards inclusion. Looking at the policy documents, the emphasis is on ensuring a *free appropriate public education* for each individual child in the *least restrictive alternative environment*. Since the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975, there have been major changes in policy regarding the education of students with disabilities. Along with its successor, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the (P.L. 94-142) has ensured that with few exceptions, all eligible students with disabilities are provided access to publicly supported education (Stainback, 1996). While this major legislation was enacted at the Federal level, inclusive practices did not automatically follow in the schools. Implementation of the LRE provision has been one of the most controversial aspects of the US education law. Resistance to integration of children with disabilities in regular public schools has led the federal government to encourage states to establish special procedures to implement and monitor an integration policy. However, restrictive and segregated placements for students with disabilities still exist in the U.S. Legislation still provides for the removal of disabled students from the regular environment when the nature or severity of the handicap is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services "cannot be achieved satisfactorily" (Biklen, 1992). The law lists a continuum of placement possibilities that each state must guarantee are available, from regular classes with supports, to homebound instruction. Courts defer to state professionals to determine and interpret the implications of federal policy in terms of the "appropriateness" of a placement however, a fact that highlights the individualized nature of the American system. Another distinctive feature of the U.S. system is the litigious nature of special education. Advocacy and landmark court cases play a large part in defining the law here. Some Italian officials I spoke with expressed the opinion that inclusion would not exist in Italy as it does today, had the government not mandated it without allowing room for disagreement.

Ireland, on the other hand, has little in the way of legislation on education in general and is currently awaiting the passage of an Education Act. The current Bill suggests that a continuum of provision for special education needs as the most appropriate formula for serving children with special education needs. It is proposed that services will range from occasional help within the ordinary school to full-time education in a special school or unit with students having the option and flexibility to move from

one type of provision to another according to individual needs. The current provision for students with disabilities ranges from complete exclusion through segregated provision, to partial integration, to inclusion in regular schools (SERC, 1993). (Numbers play a large role in this fact). The educational rights of students with special needs is mentioned in the current Education Bill, but specific reference to inclusive practices is not made. As outlined in various documents from the Ministry, the objective for the future is to ensure a continuum of provision for special educational needs. Students ought to be enabled to move as is necessary and practicable from one type of provision to another, through the various stages in their progress through the educational system (SERC, 1993). The legislation states that students with special needs have the right of access to and participation in the education system, according to their potential and ability, but the situation remains that legislation to protect these rights does not yet exist.

Pedagogy

Another theme that emerged in the documents I examined was that of curriculum entitlement. That is, the rights of students with disabilities to participate in or have acces to the curriculum. (This speaks to the issues of IEPs and responsibility of Boards of Education for all students). I have found that the pedagogic nature of integration is to a large extent reflected by the *curriculum entitlement* of pupils with special needs. This is a key aspect of inclusive education. In Ireland all pupils are entitled to access a curriculum which aims to enable them to achieve in accordance with their potential. In Italy, there are no differences between disabled students and normal ones. Students with severe disabilities can obtain certificates of attendance as opposed to the academic certificate at the end of compulsory education (UNESCO, 1996). Monitoring of progress for students with disabilities is generally regarded as a matter of practice rather than an issue dealt with in legislation, although stipulations for yearly review and evaluation are considered. In the U.S. there is an emphasis on the needs of the individual in the legislation while practical adaptation of curriculum occurs at the state and school level. Much controversy surrounds this issues in the United States, especially the question of sate assessement test scores and whose scores are included in the aggregate.

It is clear that integration in Italy is not an effort to cure the disability, but an attempt to avoid intensifying the effects of the disability, as occurs with segregation or exclusion. There is a firm belief that people with disabilities have something to offer, that everyone has something unique to offer, and that we are all responsible for accepting the challenge to learn from one another. The most notable factor is the belief that disability must not be denied, but accepted and realized in a positive way. The "deficit model" (that is, seeing the problem as within the child rather than in the environment) is very much in operation in Ireland and the U.S., despite attempts by advocates and families to focus on strengths and the future.

Identification, Assessment and Placement Decisions

In terms of organization and responsibility, each country has a department or ministry of education with a special needs or special education department. Administration is generally centralized and locally controlled. In the U.S., the individual states and school districts retain a considerable amount of power regarding placement

options. Italian education is controlled by a central administration that directs basic curriculum, the employment and management of teaching and administrative staff, and provides general directives to the schools. Local branches of central administration exist in each province. Social, medical, psychological, and rehabilitation services are now provided by the Local Health Agency, which is financed by the central administration. Social policy establishes a basic obligation on the part of government (national, regional, and local) to provide whatever health care and social support is needed by families and individuals unable to successfully participate in the mainstream social and economic systems of the country (Gerry 1989). Identification, assessment and placement or service delivery is carried out by Health Board officials in Italy and Ireland, while in the U.S., school districts have well developed school psychological services which perform the same function and are funded by the Education Department. The countries examined all have ministries of education that draft and develop policy, the organization of Special Education and service delivery is quite different. Conversations with officials in Ireland and Italy revealed that they are not always content with this arrangement. Ireland is looking at developing full psychological services in schools at the moment, and looking at the larger picture, it is true to say that the field is changing rapidly.

Conclusion

To conclude, special education is in the process of major reform all over the world. There is a greater awareness of the need to improve educational quality for students with disabilities on a global level, and the current movement would appear towards inclusion or improved education for all.

Looking at current inclusion policy in Italy, Ireland, and the U.S., the most significant difference I have found has been that in the U.S. and Ireland, there are suggestions in policy documents which are enabling and permissive, but they have not been mandated, and so each school is left to determine its own arrangements. There is no room for ambiguity or exemption in Italy – all schools must provide for children with disabilities to be integrated in the regular classroom. That is not to say that Italy has not encountered difficulty in the implementation of the law, it has not been an easy task. It has however, taken on the issue of taking responsibility of educating its students with disabilities in a way that will provide example and inspiration to others hoping to follow.

There are attempts to make the curriculum more strongly individualized in order to be fully inclusive. Italy has eliminated the "deficit model" (that is, seeing the problem as within the child rather than in the educational environment or school system) which is still in operation in Irish and U.S. systems. It has placed the primary focus on changing the nature of the educational environment of the regular school in order to reduce the educationally handicapping consequences that may follow from certain impairments and disabilities.

The overall trend/direction would appear to be an improvement of education for all and a merging of special education and regular education. It is time to move special education out of the ghetto and into the mainstream (UNESCO, 1994). In that way,

special education will not be seen as an approach suited to the needs of a few, but an approach to teaching capable of improving education for all.

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